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Abstract

There is a general disquiet in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector about the sustainability of initiatives and best practice guidelines in the context of low status, pay and investment. The ECCE Scheme (2010; DCYA, 2018b) provided access to three hours of “free” ECCE for children aged 2.8 years who could continue to avail of the ECCE until they reached 5.6 years old (DCYA, 2018b). Ireland, under the Barcelona Summit (2002), was obliged to provide increased access to ECCE to (European Commission, 2008) to increase women’s participation in the labour market (European Commission, 2008). However, the introduction of the ECCE scheme (2010) contributed to already existing structural and financial challenges in the provision of quality ECCE. To explore parental and practitioners’ experiences of the scheme, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 practitioners and 15 parents. Findings reveal that the scheme seems to have been unsuccessful in supporting practitioners in meeting quality standards, the costs associated with the introduction of the scheme as well as in meeting the needs of working parents for accessible ECCE.

Keywords

ECCE Scheme (2010), Quality ECEC, Early Childhood Education and Care, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Inquiry

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“We Can’t Provide a Quality Service on Shoestrings”: Irish Practitioners Perspectives on the ECCE Scheme (2010)

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There is a general disquiet in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector about the sustainability of initiatives and best practice guidelines in the context of low status, pay and investment. The ECCE Scheme (2010; DCYA, 2018b) provided access to three hours of “free” ECCE for children aged 2.8 years who could continue to avail of the ECCE until they reached 5.6 years old (DCYA, 2018b). Ireland, under the Barcelona Summit (2002), was obliged to provide increased access to ECCE to (European Commission, 2008) to increase women’s participation in the labour market (European Commission, 2008). However, the introduction of the ECCE scheme (2010) contributed to already existing structural and financial challenges in the provision of quality ECCE. To explore parental and practitioners’ experiences of the scheme, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 practitioners and 15 parents. Findings reveal that the scheme seems to have been unsuccessful in supporting practitioners in meeting quality standards, the costs associated with the introduction of the scheme as well as in meeting the needs of working parents for accessible ECCE. Keywords: ECCE Scheme (2010), Quality ECEC, Early Childhood Education and Care, Grounded Theory, Qualitative Inquiry

Introduction

Numerous benefits have been associated with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) while many studies have investigated the economic and societal impact of universal ECCE programmes (Baker, 2011; Haynes & Mogstad, 2015; Zhou, Li, Ying Hu, & Li, 2017), the significance of quality ECCE remains of utmost importance (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). It is well established that quality ECCE can make a significant difference in the lives of young children (European Commission, 2014; Lipsey, Farran & Hofer, 2018) especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ansari & Lopez, 2015; Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017; Roberts, 2015). Research indicates that quality in ECCE comprises of process (e.g., positive interactions between children, families and practitioners, etc.) and structural components (e.g., stable working conditions for practitioners and safe ECCE environments, etc.) which are influenced by economic, political and cultural factors (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2016; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013; European Commission, 2014).

Hence, this paper contributes to insights on a universal access programme in Ireland; the ECCE Scheme (2010) was an attempt by Irish policy makers (namely, the Childcare Directorate of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) to move beyond the highly disjointed and privatised Irish model of ECEC (Urban, Robson, & Scacchi, 2017), thereby, contributing to the professionalism of the sector and better outcomes for children (Ozonya, 2012). As part of the Barcelona Summit (2002) (European Commission, 2008), Ireland was obliged to provide pre-school education to “90% of children [minimum] between [2.8 years old] and the mandatory school age” (European Commission, 2008). This agreement was primarily enacted to improve equal employment opportunities between women and men

(European Commission, 2008) by providing free ECCE to children (DCYA, 2017b). The ECCE Scheme (2010) is an initiative available to children between 2.8 and 5.6 years old that provides children with access to ECCE prior to transitioning into primary school. Children can access up to 15 hours per week over 38 weeks per year (September to June) (DCYA, 2018b) which was deemed insufficient to facilitate working parents (Hayes, O'Donoghue-Hynes, & Wolfe, 2013). In essence, however, I argue in this paper that quality ECEC should primarily concerned with improving children's lives and outcomes (Perlman et al., 2017) rather than solely focusing on the correlation between accessible ECCE and increased female participating in the workforce. This is not to say that practitioners' and parents' needs should not be considered in policy development but that collaborative actions by the government results in positive ECCE outcomes for children, practitioners and their families. Therefore, children, parents and practitioners' views should be prioritised in the development of new ECEC policy and initiatives and what is best for the child is what policies affecting children should be primarily concerned with (United Nations, 1989). This means investing in quality and affordable ECCE, the facilitation of occupational profiles for those working in ECCE, stable work environments, accessible continued professional development opportunities (Urban et al., 2017) and consultation with ECCE stakeholders (children and families; CECDE, 2006).

The ECCE Scheme and Administrative Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care

For an early childhood care and education (ECCE) service to participate in the ECCE Scheme (2010), a number of administrative and structural changes were required. To register for the scheme, providers needed to complete a series of online applications (DCYA, 2018b) and increased qualification levels were mandated for ECCE leaders participating in the scheme (ibid.). Additionally, an increase in workload was associated with ECCE services participating in the scheme, who were required to provide documentary evidence for the implementation of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), Ireland's National Curriculum Framework and Síolta (CECDE, 2006), Ireland's National Quality Framework for ECCE (DCYA, 2018b). ECCE services were also subject to inspections based on their compliance with these frameworks (TUSLA, 2018). It seems reasonable then that many service providers were found to be operating at a monetary loss because of the administrative costs and non-contact hours associated with the implementation of the ECCE Scheme (Oireachtas, 2016). Due to similar findings, the Minister for Children stated that the scheme would only be extended when the overall quality of the sector improved such as accessible professional development and training for practitioners (Healy, 2013). The Oireachtas (2016) agreed with this view and recommended that a second ECCE Scheme (2010) year should only be considered when "higher quality standards are achieved across the country...[and] followed by an incremental implementation of a subsidised model of provision linked to quality and based on a parent's ability to pay a maximum capped level" (Oireachtas, 2016, p. 22).

Nevertheless, in 2016, the ECCE Scheme was extended (Ring et al., 2016) while further changes followed with the 2018 budget (DCYA, 2017b), which included changes to entitlement, higher capitation, start dates and general refinements of the ECCE Scheme (2010) (Table 1). The available evidence seems to suggest that a basic problem with the scheme relates to the absence of consultation with the ECCE sector before its introduction. A loss of income for ECCE settings has resulted, coupled with increased workload in an already overburdened workforce. The expansion of the scheme from one to two years was enacted in the absence of a robust plan to address significant issues in the ECCE workforce such as strategies to increase the quality of ECCE services, the rising cost of ECCE for parents, occupational profiles and adequate pay scales for those who work in ECCE. It is envisaged that even with the recent introduction of the Programme Support Payment (PSP; DCYA, 2018a), which aims to

supplement non-contact time for practitioners, the issue of paperwork and non-contact hours will remain due to the amount of paperwork associated with the scheme.

Table 1: Changes to the ECCE Scheme for the 2018 Budget

Type	Changes
Average Entitlement	The scheme was extended for eligible children (based on age). “All children born between September and December will have increased [potential] eligibility (76 weeks rather than 61 weeks). This will benefit more than 20,000 children each year” (DCYA, 2017b, p. 3). The scheme would still be available for 3 hours per day.
Higher Capitation	ECEC settings would see an increase of 7% in their higher capitation payments (DCYA, 2017b). This was to aid in the retention and sustainability of a graduate-led workforce (DCYA, 2017b).
Start Date	These changes would be effective from September, 2018. This was to ensure that “those parents who were expecting to start their children in ECCE in January and April 2018 will still be able to do so” (DCYA, 2017b, p. 2).
Children born between January and March	Children born between January and March would lose 12 weeks eligibility (i.e. rather than 88 weeks would have 76 weeks) (DCYA, 2017b). According to the DCYA (2017b) this was to rectify a mistake in the budget of 2016 which gave extra weeks to children born between January and March.
Refinements	From September 2018, “children will be eligible to start free preschool when they turn age 2 years and 8 months and can continue in free pre-school until they start primary school (once the child is not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of the relevant pre-school year i.e. end June)” (DCYA, 2017b, p. 6).

This research was predicated on two research questions which aimed to define quality in ECCE as well as identify the challenges associated with quality provision. Three distinct forms of data collection were selected. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in addition to a further 15 with parents (one parent per child) to formulate an understanding of their perceptions of the components of quality ECCE. A research journal was also employed by the researcher throughout this research process. Any bias that aided in the uncovering and challenging of prejudice in relation to ECCE was documented. The journal was also used to document the researcher’s thoughts before and after each interview. This process of gathering data from more than one viewpoint is known as triangulation (Flick, 2018). To aid in the conciliation of the multiple viewpoints that influence quality ECCE (Chopra, 2016), the current research is founded on the belief that children’s development is influenced by the interactions between the child’s environment and those within it (Bronfenbrenner & Pamela, 2007). Therefore, these factors were considered in the exploration of the components that determine quality ECCE and influence on children’s learning and development (Bronfenbrenner & Pamela, 2007).

Self-of-the-Researcher

I am in the latter stages of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), my research is entitled “An investigation into the components that determine quality Early Childhood Care and Education: Practitioner and Parental Perspectives.” My first degree was also in early childhood care and education and I became extremely interested on the effect of children’s early educational experiences on later life. My curiosity in this topic was first sparked by the life of my Grandfather, Justice Anthony Aniagolu (1922-2011), who was born into extreme poverty in Nigeria, Africa. His mother always believed in the power of a quality education and even though basic necessities eluded them sometimes, education was always at the forefront of her mind. Coupled with his mother’s support and his perseverance, my Grandfather received a coveted scholarship to study Law in Bristol University. He subsequently returned to Nigeria where he became a supreme court judge after many years of practising as a lawyer.

Due to my Grandfather’s life and my training in early childhood education and care, I have always held the belief that if given the opportunity, a quality education can catapult any child to unimaginable heights (García, Heckman & Ziff, 2018). This belief formed the basis for this study and prompted the question: “What is needed to ensure that children receive the best foundational early learning experiences, so that each child, no matter who they are or where they come from, can be given the tools to succeed and contribute to society in a positive way?”

Methodology

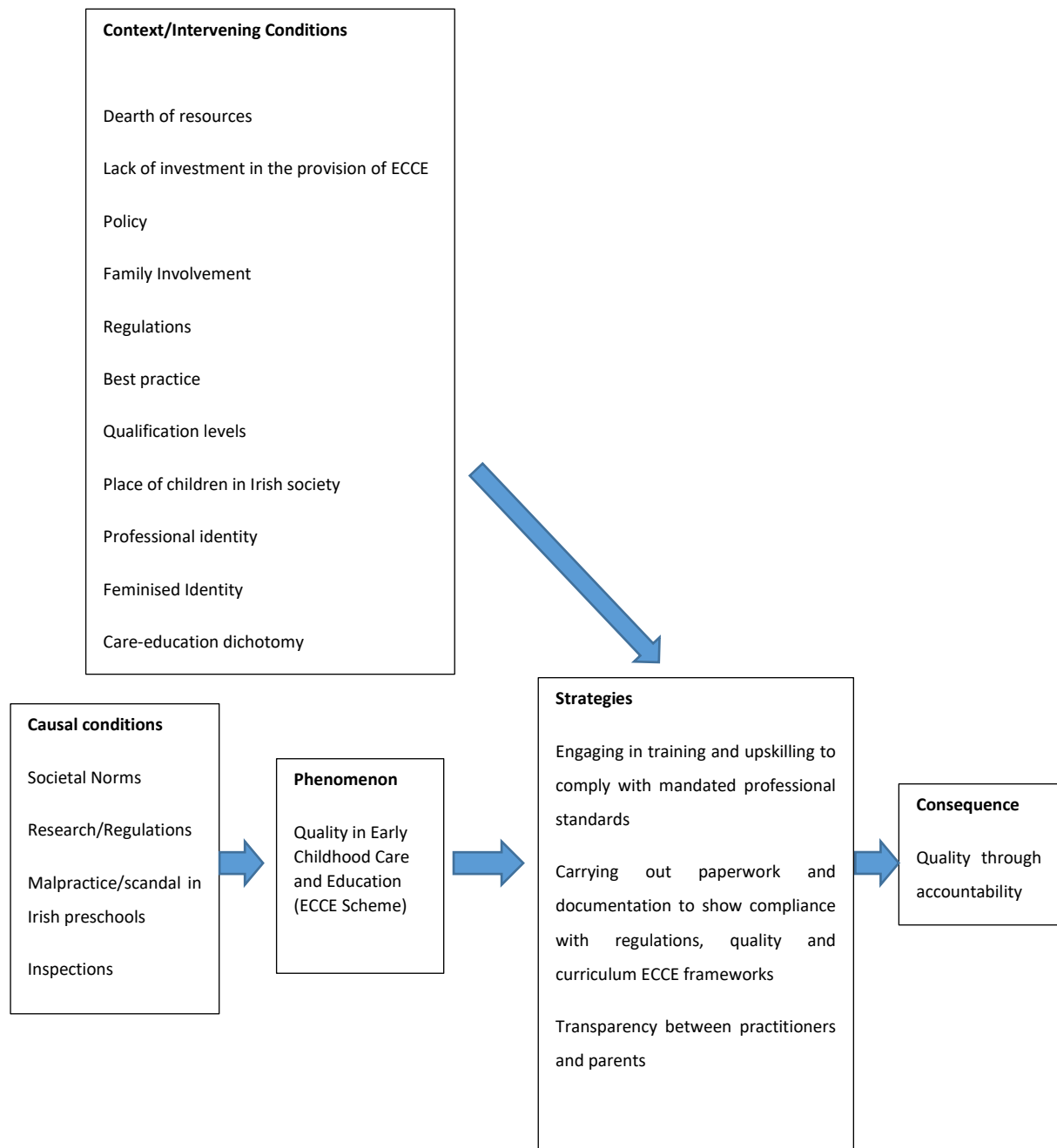
Quality ECCE is contested and there are inconsistencies within the literature as to how it may be monitored and what it is comprised of (Sheridan, 2009). I aimed to add to the discourse on quality in Irish ECCE services by exploring how parents and practitioners define this value-laden concept (NCCA, 2009), through the meanings they attach to it, within the confines of the ECCE Scheme (2010). Notably, quality can be divided into two overarching themes (process and structural quality). Process quality refers to the complex interactions between children, practitioners and parents (Hu et al., 2017). As such, I employed the semi-structured qualitative interview method because this type of research investigation is premised on the assumption that multiple forms of reality exist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This allowed me to capture and explain the diverse views of practitioners and parents using “well-grounded, rich description and explanations” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 4) of the ECCE Scheme (2010). The qualitative approach also gave insights into practitioners’ lived experiences and aided in the examination of structural aspects of quality provision (Grbich, 2013), that is the measurable components of quality (TUSLA, 2016). I also used the qualitative approach to compare my findings, build theory and make recommendations (Flick, 2014) for the improvement of quality ECCE in Ireland. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers in addition to a further 15 with parents (one parent per child) to formulate an understanding of their perceptions of the components of quality ECCE.

Grounded Theory was the qualitative inquiry I used to analyse the data gathered. Grounded Theory allowed me to provide possible explanations between certain phenomenon within the ECCE sector (Urquhart, 2013). I transcribed all interviews and read the transcripts “line by line” (Strauss, 1987, p. 28) multiple times during the open coding stage. That is, I ensured that all findings from this study were directly informed by the primary research conducted with practitioners and parents and further supported by pertinent research from the literature review. I identified initial codes (ibid.) during the open coding process and refined them into categories during the axial coding stage (ibid.) which lasted for many months. Based on the axial coding stage, core categories (accountability, relationships, the professional

workforce and the ECCE Scheme) emerged and the selective coding process began. The coding paradigm used for the overall study on quality in the ECCE Scheme as it relates to the data collection process is also described in this paper (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Coding Program

[Adapted from Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Morrow et al., 1995]



A research journal was also employed by the researcher throughout this research process. Any bias that aided in the uncovering and challenging of prejudice in relation to ECCE was documented. The journal was also used to document the researcher's thoughts before and after each interview. This process of gathering data from more than one viewpoint is known as triangulation (Flick, 2018). To aid in the conciliation of the multiple viewpoints that influence quality ECCE (Chopra, 2016), the current research is founded on the belief that children's development is influenced by the interactions between the child's environment and those within it (Bronfenbrenner & Pamela, 2007). Therefore, these factors were considered in the exploration of the components that determine quality ECCE and influence on children's learning and development (Bronfenbrenner & Pamela, 2007).

Information Sheet and Consent Forms

Practitioners and parents were provided with Information Sheets that served to explain the research aims in clear, non-technical language. The Information Sheet stated what was expected of participants and was broken down into paragraphs to make it easier to read. Any risks of participating in this study as well as the voluntary nature of this study were clearly outlined. The information sheet specified how confidentiality would be preserved, while contact details for further information or support were provided (Walliman, 2011). Practitioners and parents were also required to sign a Consent Form which was attached to the Information Sheet. By signing the Consent Form, participants agreed that they understood the research goals and what was required of them. Signed copies were retained by the researcher and stored in a locked cabinet.

Research Protocol

Although the researcher was aware of certain information which could identify practitioners and parents, nothing that could identify them was included in this research, for instance pseudonyms were used for those who took part in this study and the information collected was solely used to explore the components that determine quality in ECCE. To optimise participant participation, data collection during the interview stage revolved around participants' timetables (Matthews & Kostelis, 2011). Interviews lasted for approximately one hour.

Semi-structured Interviews

Participants in this study consisted of parents (n=15) of children participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010) and practitioners (n=18) who worked with children participating in ECCE. All practitioners had a minimum of four years' experience, QQI level 5 (one-year certificate in ECCE) in ECCE and worked in Cork, Republic of Ireland, except for one practitioner who worked in Dublin, Republic of Ireland. The use of a qualitative method enabled the uncovering of hidden meanings on unobservable things like emotions, prior experiences of quality ECCE and how external influences such as social norms could impact on practitioners' and parents' view of quality ECCE. For example, the use of semi-structured interview in this study provided valuable insights into quality ECCE from practitioner and parental perspectives. An interview schedule was used for the practitioner and parental interviews. The semi-structured approach was deemed more suitable than the structured interview approach because unlike structured interviews, it allowed for flexibility in the mode of inquiry. The use of the semi-structured interview also empowered practitioners and parents to speak about their subjective experiences on quality ECCE. This process inspired

practitioners and parents to challenge and contradict any pre-formulated interview questions, resulting in new learning and the development of ECCE theory (Myers, 2013). A purposive sampling technique was used to identify knowledgeable practitioners for the semi-structured interview. Patton (2015) defines purposive sampling as the selection of participants who are knowledgeable on the phenomenon under investigation; participants who will provide fruitful and in-depth data. A list of publicly available records was sourced from TUSLA (2017) of early childhood services in Cork, Ireland.

An ECCE service was chosen at random from this list and thereafter, the adoption of the snowballing technique in the current study provided access to practitioners and parents (Meurs, 2016; Yuan, 2017). For instance, this technique involved asking practitioners to recommend other practitioners to take part in the study. It also aided in identifying parents availing of the ECCE Scheme in the absence of a public list of records (Meurs, 2016). Although, the snowballing technique can increase access, it also has the potential for prejudice in that a practitioner or parent may only be recommended because they hold similar values (with the person recommending them) about quality ECCE (Liamputtong, 2011). As such, referred participants needed to also have certain skills, and specific selection criteria was applied to those who chose to participate in this study. A minimum of a QQI Level 5 award in ECCE and current participation in the ECCE Scheme (2010) was a requirement for practitioners wishing to partake in this study; however, the majority of practitioners in this study possessed at least a QQI Level 6 award in ECCE with a total average of 11.5 years of experience working with young children.

Ethical Considerations for the Semi-structured Interviews with Parents and Practitioners

It was essential that the researcher took certain precautions to increase the reliability of the methods employed in this study (Gallagher, 2005). Having worked as a practitioner in the field of ECCE, the researcher could relate to the practitioners and in part, to parents who took part in this study. As an insider-researcher, it was important that the researcher applied specific safeguards to ensure that participants were treated fairly and the research process was transparent. Approval was also granted from the Cork Institute of Technology Code of Ethic Review Board.

Minimising the Risk of Harm

“Risk refers to potential harm (physical psychological or social) that may arise from the research” (DCYA, 2012, p. 2). Even though this study could be classed as a low-risk study, there was potential for harm to practitioners and parents. Due to this, precautions were taken to reduce the risk of harm such as avoiding the use of deceptive practices, leading questions, the protection of sensitive information, the health and welfare of practitioners and parents (Emdin & Lehner, 2006). The procedures taken to aid the well-being of, and respect for, parents and practitioners who participated in the semi-structured interviews are explained below.

Rapport

“Rapport refers to the degree of comfort in the interactions between the researcher and the research participants” (Given, 2008, p. 728). Rapport was fostered by having respect for the participants. During the interview process, rapport was facilitated by describing the aim of the project and other additional information in a truthful manner. The interview began with non-controversial questions. These questions aided the researcher in getting to know the

participant. Trust was built through active listening, explaining how confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld, and asking for permission to record and take notes (Klenke, 2008).

Discussion: Practitioner Semi-Structured Interviews

ECCE Scheme: Policy and Practice

Practitioners expressed their support for the ECCE Scheme (2010) with regards to its benefits for children and parents, T4 explains: “My experience is that it’s wonderful for the parents” (T4). The acquisition of social skills and foundational learning experiences were the main benefits for children availing of the scheme, “Well, I think it’s fabulous in the sense that it gave every child an opportunity to come and get the foundations” (T12). This is in line with longitudinal research which shows the far-reaching benefits for children who attend preschool (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (1997-2004) (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004); the Perry Preschool Evaluation (1962-2002) (Schweinhart, 2007). An Irish study by Ring et al. (2015) found that “the majority of early years educators 85.5% stated that children would benefit from a second free pre-school year (FPSY)” (p. 111). Research also suggests that ECCE may contribute to a child’s ability to regulate their emotions (Tough, 2012), improve social and cognitive skills (NCCA, 2009). Although practitioners in this study saw the benefits of universal access for all children (Bauchmüller, Grøtz, & Rasumussen, 2014), key challenges were identified for ECCE services. Practitioners expressed frustration with many aspects of the ECCE Scheme (2010). Even with a higher capitation grant of €80.25 which is paid by the government to ECCE services who employ practitioners with a degree, some ECCE providers struggled to cover costs such as staff holidays. It was also noted that payment for staff holidays are a statutory requirement (Organisation of Working Time Act, 1997) and so, practitioners were surprised that the ECCE Scheme (2010) did not cover holidays:

I do think we should be paid for 42 because I have to pay my staff for 42 weeks. That’s just a statutory holiday requirement. I do think every service should be paid enough to cover holidays for staff. Like, if you work 52 weeks in the year, for example, you’re entitled to 4 weeks holidays in the year paid. Its 16 1/2 days if you’re working 38 weeks. Those 16 1/2 days should be covered as part of the ECCE Scheme. (T18)

The issue of child absenteeism and the ECCE Scheme (2010) was also highlighted.

I do believe if there’s anything given for free it’s taken very much for granted. I don’t think they [parents] appreciated a lot of it. We would have an awful lot of absenteeism in the free year whereas we’ve noticed when they are paying, they will be coming in and that actually truthful. (T9)

Practitioners claimed that parents took the programme for granted and they were more likely to access the service when there was a cost attributed to it: “They are getting it for free so there is less emphasis on its importance” (T17). Although there have been reports that there has been a huge uptake of children participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010) (Neylon, 2012), practitioners reported that they had observed reduced daily attendance of children in ECCE. This reduction in daily attendance may also impact on ECCE payments for the provider since services are paid based on the daily rate of attendance for ECCE children (DCYA, 2018a). As a result, the Oireachtas (2017b) recommends for the introduction of “an agreement, or contract,

between the service provider and parents. The contract would serve as a pathway to improved attendance, and at the same time, it would not penalise the provider for poor attendance” (p. 22). Poor attendance may be further exacerbated by parental assumptions that the ECCE is a stepping stone and the start of “real learning” (T2) begins in primary school.

There is also no incentive for the parent to value the provider because it is free they're looking at it as childminding and the parents think that when children start primary school that's when they'll do their real learning. That's where it would be great if parents were given some information or training on the importance of ECCE. It's either that we'll [preschool providers] have to have a parent's night but then again, the onus is on us even though it is a scheme brought in by the department. They want us to do all the background work, but they get all the credit when they come out and say, “we've now supplied 50,000 free ECCE places. (T2)

Practitioners maintained that educating parents on the benefits of ECCE would aid in parental understandings of the value of ECCE and increase attendance rates in ECCE services. They believed that the government should deliver information sessions and advertising campaigns so that the onus was not solely on practitioners who were not recognised for their work with parents. Findings also suggest that there may be a status divide within the ECCE profession. T3 suggests that it is not possible to create a stimulating curriculum for children under the age of three because “there is not enough training [available to people who] work in crèches to provide proper experiences through a curriculum.” Practitioners who had experience working with children under 3 noted that they were treated less like educators and more like an unqualified child-minder. The current study seems to validate the view proposed by Sims and Waniganayake (2015) who argues that there is a gap between care and education which derives from the idea that education takes place in the absence of care. It is this type of thinking which further propounds the idea that practitioner’s role as educators is “second to that of primary school teachers” (T2). The current study concurs with Peeters (2013) who asserts that “teaching and bridging roles are usually emphasised over the caring role, and assistants are primarily expected to raise the (pre-academic achievements of children, consistent with the schoolification of ECCE” (Peeters 2013, p. 25). In the current study, for instance, practitioners viewed crèches as care-focused, disregarding their role in the development and education of the child. There was also a clear distinction made by practitioners in this study between crèches and preschools, “NO! We are a preschool, not a crèche! What we do is much more in-depth” (T10).

ECCE services were largely described as an educational and care programme intended to act as a bridge between ECCE services and primary school education, “0-3 is going to be more crèche and minding but when they are coming to preschool that more education, they start from 3 years” (T17). Contrastingly, Irish research purports the view that care and education are interconnected (Department of Education and Science, 1999), yet the ECCE Scheme requires that practitioner have higher qualifications than those working with younger children. Similarly, in Australia, the Productivity Commission (2014) argue that practitioners who work with very young children should not be required to have university level degrees as there is not enough evidence to support the need for highly-skilled practitioners who care for and educate infants. In addition to the care-education dichotomy observed in the current study, dissatisfaction with work conditions and processes were also identified and the hours provided by the ECCE Scheme (2010) were highly criticised, “What they should have done is resourced a full year properly, so children could have full days if they wanted, we could be paid a decent wage, we didn’t need a second year we needed one good year” (T8). Practitioners stated that

the ECCE Scheme (2010) does not provide universal access for all children but rather subsidises ECCE fees at the expense of appropriate working conditions for practitioners. It seems unlikely that three hours per day could significantly increase female participation in the workforce (Hayes et al. 2013):

[The government is] cloaking it [ECCE Scheme] as an answer to childcare but it's not because please tell me the parent that works from quarter to nine to quarter to 12 and does 2 hours? Unless you're sitting outside that gate or your house is across the road or your job is next to it [the child's pre-school]. Otherwise it doesn't make sense. (T3)

However, some practitioners contested the link with the ECCE Scheme (2010) and an increase in employment opportunities: "We are not childcare workers and the ECCE scheme is not childcare, it's not to facilitate you to go to work. It's an education-based programme to educate young children" (T7). On the contrary, the Irish government was mandated to provide access to "90% of children [minimum] between 3 years old and the mandatory school age" (European Commission, 2008) by 2010 because "suitable childcare provision is an essential step towards equal opportunities in employment between women and men" (European Commission, 2008). This may suggest that the main focus of the scheme was to increase female participation in the workforce, rather than to facilitate positive outcomes for children or support quality provision. Despite this, the argument that a rise in hours provided by the ECCE Scheme (2010) is necessitated needs to be explored further. Research suggests that long hours (30+ hours) spent in ECCE can negatively influence children's behaviour by age 4 (The NICHD, 2005) and minimal negative effects are also observed in language development (Hall & McGinity, 2015, p. 65). Therefore, practitioners' argument for longer supplemented hours to accommodate salaries and increase capitation may be justified but does not necessarily mean that access to longer hours in ECCE services would be in the best interests of the child. Therefore, the argument that there should be a balance between the hours a child spends in ECCE and at home may be warranted.

Fundamentally, practitioners were concerned with the increasing focus on paperwork and non-contact time: "We spend hours and hours afterwards in the day filling out forms and documenting, it's just ridiculous...they do not take into account that you have to pay somebody to be there as well" (T5). It has been noted that to effectively improve quality early childhood services, an ECCE capability strategy, retention of practitioners, increase in pay and training must precede any subsidisation plans (Early Childhood Ireland, 2016). Unfortunately, rather than investing in the professionalisation of the ECCE sector, the Irish government invested €4 million in 2017 to support the increase of ECCE places, infrastructure and the creation of natural outdoor play areas in ECCE services (DCYA, 2017a). A commitment to increasing or supplementing practitioners' salaries also appeared to be missing from this investment plan (DCYA, 2017a). Without practitioners who can develop relationships with children and provide developmentally stimulating learning experiences, quality ECCE may never be realised (Cumming, Sumison, & Wong, 2015). There is a possibility that extensive consultation is needed with key stakeholders to identify the major challenges associated with participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010), resulting in the development of an actionable and well-resourced improvement plan: "The hours needs to be longer, the pay for the capitation needs to be higher to support staff in the paperwork and the staff wages need to be separate. You will see a massive difference in the sector" (T9). Practitioners also alluded that there was a need for consultation with policy makers during the drafting of ECCE contracts, we are tied to a contract we have no control over what we sign at the end of the year because we know we are not going to get any money unless we sign" (T7). Even when this contract was signed an adhered to the

capitation rates meant that ECCE providers were unable to pay themselves a commensurate salary: “After 4 years, this was the first year I was paid a salary” (T2). The issue of low-pay was linked to under-representation in representative bodies such as unions.

There is not enough consultation between any policymakers at any level. We seem to be the only sector that does not shout when it’s been told to jump. If you say boo to a nurse there is a strike, if you say it to a teacher there is a strike (T5).

Some services in the current study were in debt and delineated that “unless they [the government] actually give more money per child, many services will be unsustainable, us included” (T13). The current study also suggests that the average amount of time spent per day in non-contact hours is 2 hours.

However, for some practitioners in this study, the reality was 3 to 5 hours per day or 15 to 20 hours per week: “I would say probably 15 to 20 hours per week” (T8) in unfavourable conditions, “easily, 3 to 4 hours per day and that does not include when you are in the sleeping room double jobbing...You’re in the dark and you have all your files on your lap and there is no lighting (T9). This was correlated with the over emphasis on accountability and documentation of quality practice “I think we are spending so much time now proving what we are doing as oppose to doing it” (T9). In counterpoint, some practitioners believed that the emphasis on compliance was unfounded: “I don’t think you need proof to show that you’re doing the right thing. The paperwork is ridiculous, it’s too much and we don’t have time because they’re only paying us contact time” (T12). Practitioners asserted that spending time with children was a priority: “I can’t sit down in the middle of the class and start doing my paperwork... That’s why people are employing other people to sit there and do observations...you want to be interacting with the children” (T12).

Participants perceived paperwork as a burden that hindered them from educating and caring for children. It also seemed to disrupt their family life: “All my time is taken up by paperwork at home, my [own] children have become my PA’s and it does interrupt your family life” (T12). Subsequently, the Programme Support Payment (PSP) was introduced “to acknowledge the non-contact time required to deliver high-quality services” (DCYA, 2017b). ECCE services receive a grant depending on the number of children they had (an ECCE service with 20 children would receive approximately €1,800 in total, for approximately 39.5 weeks). However, if an average of 2 hours per day is spent on paperwork for 39.5 weeks, it seems that the PSP grant will not be sufficient to support practitioners in non-contact hours. In addition to administrative issues, T9 also raised the issue of non-compliance in her setting, “In my current employment place, none of these ECCE teachers [room leaders] have level 6 or level 7 or level 8” (T9). Although the ECCE Scheme (2010) stipulates that to be eligible for capitation grant, the room leader must have at least a Level 7 qualification and three years’ experience, T9 contends that this was not being implemented in the setting she worked in. This might suggest that some services are not following the terms of the ECCE Scheme (2010) contract. Fundamentally, the love of children is what brought many practitioners into the ECCE profession (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995) but love, will not be enough to retain them:

We are at their wits end and its only September. You can't live on the love of children. It's not even about having a living wage anymore, it's about having enough to survive from Monday to Friday. There're people going into their services knowing that they'll be operating at a loss but unfortunately, they have a mortgage and they can't get out of it, they're stuck. (T18)

The quality of ECCE is mainly dependent on those who provide it (Sylva et al., 2004). Therefore, it seems that resources and investment in ECCE and especially for providers participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010) must be addressed if quality ECCE practice is to be supported.

Discussion: Parental Semi-Structured Interviews

ECCE Scheme: Policy and Practice

Parents recognised the benefits of the ECCE Scheme for families who may not have been able to avail of ECCE services and the advantages of availing of such services. The “development of self-confidence and for kids to be able to do things for themselves” (P5) and “the funding through the government...” (P1) were consistently recognised as key attributes of the scheme which was seen as a “a great opportunity to get your kids mixing before they attend school” (P12). Similarly, Hall and McGinity (2015) indicates that “just over one in five parents said they would not otherwise have been able to afford to send their child to preschool without the Free Preschool Year” (p. 8). Research indicates that quality ECCE has been found to benefit all children, especially those from disadvantaged areas (Ansari & Lopez 2015). However, parents declared that for those who were “working they [the government] say that this is a free preschool year but [not] for a lot of parents (P2). Even for parents who worked part-time, dropping and collecting their child after three hours was not feasible: “I wouldn’t be in a position to leave work to collect them.” This seemed to force parents to arrange other types of care for their children, such as a “childminder” (P9) who parents were “still paying” (P2) to collect their children. Even with these difficulties the scheme was described as “beneficial and better than nothing” (P2). Echoing practitioners’ perspectives, parents felt that “having [the ECCE Scheme] limited to 38 weeks and only 3 hours a day means it doesn’t help working parents as much as it could. It really benefits those who work shorter hours or who don’t work outside the home” (P9). The scheme did not seem to incentivise stay-at-home parents to re-enter the workforce, P14 asks: “Who works for only 2-3 hours?” Parents also suggested that the government revisit the scheme and provide one full year which would consider the needs of working parents.

It might be more beneficial to have one year for the full day...We have gone from a nuclear family where one was working, usually, the male and then the mother would be a stay at home. Now, that option may not be available to most. We’re more atomised and both male and female are forced to work outside of the home. The option to have one parent at home isn’t there. Whether it’s male or female doing it. I think it’s a good investment to create a national economy that supports those type of decisions for parents. (P3)

Drawing from the interpretations of parents regarding the scheme, there may be a need to provide a year for children before they enter primary school that is fully resourced and fit for purpose (Rogers, 2015). This full year would provide a structured, fully integrated ECCE experience with the option of care and education within the home to allow parents the choice to return to work. As previously discussed, the hours provided would have to be supported by research and be in the best interests of the child rather than parents seeking employment opportunities. Findings also suggest that the scheme seems to supplement only part of a parents working day. Three hours for thirty-eight weeks of the year does not seem sufficient for parents in full-time employment. For the full potential of the ECCE Scheme (2010) to be realised, it seems that consultation is needed between policy makers and ECCE stakeholders to understand

how best to structure and execute this scheme. As mentioned previously, Ireland, under the Barcelona Summit (2002) was mandated to provide access to ECCE for children aged 3 years up to primary school age (European Commission, 2008). As discussed, this agreement sought to increase labour activation of women (European Commission, 2008). However, P3 concluded that at least one parent should be at home when children are in ECCE and that three hours was sufficient to provide children with opportunities to “make friends and play with others” (P3).

One thing is that it's only for 3 hours and it doesn't give us the option for Jessica my wife to go back to work. It makes that option less likely. Now whether that's a good thing or bad thing can be debated. Personally speaking, I think children benefit from having at least one parent at home. (P3)

Furthermore, parents labelled the scheme as “discriminatory [because] my youngest won't be able to start for a whole year because she is 5 days outside of the eligible start date, it's ridiculous!” (P1). To put this into context, the 2018 budget stipulated that children could only avail of the scheme if they were 2.8 years on or before the eligible enrolment date (September of proposed ECCE start date) (DCYA, 2018b). This meant that thousands of children would not be entitled to attend the scheme ranging from a number of weeks to a full preschool year (38 weeks).

Discussion

Practitioners and parents praised the ECCE Scheme (2010) for increased accessibility and affordability to ECEC for children from diverse backgrounds (Hall & McGinnity, 2015). Practitioners agreed with the age limit on the ECCE Scheme (2010) of 2.8 years claiming that children younger would not benefit from the structure of preschool. This study finds that the ECCE Scheme (2010) has caused a loss of income for ECEC settings, increased confusion and workload in an increasingly overburdened workforce. The expansion of the scheme from one to two years has resulted in fragmented provision, an increase in unpaid non-contact hours and the need for increased staff and wages. It is envisaged that even with the introduction of the Programme Support Payment (PSP), which aims to supplement non-contact time, the issue of paperwork and non-contact hours will remain. Findings indicate that providers are spending an average of 2 hours daily on paperwork, which requires investment in adequate ECEC staffing and wages.

As a result, it is unlikely that a small PSP of €1,600 will cover these costs. It was also argued, that the ECCE Scheme (2010) was primarily concerned with labour activation and increasing female participation in the workforce, rather than improving ECCE access and/or working conditions for practitioners in order to meet the demands of a growing population. The introduction of the ECCE Scheme (2010) was meant to increase labour activation by supplementing 3 hours free ECCE; yet, practitioners argued that 3 hours per day was unlikely to incentivise parents to return to work. On the other hand, practitioners are paid for 3 hours while participating in the scheme but are expected to carry out several observations and other administrative duties during these few hours, while also providing care and education to children. This study suggests that with an overburdened workforce, increased capacity and a lack of funding, the impact of the ECCE Scheme (2010) on the quality of children's early years experiences may be minimal if these issues are not addressed. It can be deduced then, that the free preschool hours given to children may not necessarily be the deciding factor for parents who want to return to work. Indeed, the scheme seems to have failed working parents regarding labour activation and failed to support practitioners in meeting quality standards and costs associated with the scheme. This research would argue that the introduction of the ECCE

Scheme (2010) just like the purpose of ECEC, should be always steered towards the best interests of the child and any changes in policy should always reflect the child's right to education (Herczog, 2012; United Nations, 1989). Findings also suggest, however, that parents and practitioners viewed the ECCE Scheme (2010) primarily from a cost and affordability standpoint. 3 hours per day of preschool may be enough to allow children to socialise, make friends and learn daily living skills. Indeed, research (Hall & McGinity, 2015; NICHD, 2005) finds that long hours in ECEC can have negative effects on children's development. Practitioners consistently asked, "Who works for 3 hours?" or highlighted the fact that parents would still need to pay a childminder even while accessing the ECCE Scheme (2010). Nonetheless, improving labour activation may have financial benefits for families and children (European Commission, 2008). Additionally, quality ECEC has been linked to qualified staff (Cumming et al., 2015) who are well-paid and supported in their continued professional development (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014). In this light, the argument to restructure the scheme may become relevant and could be beneficial to children availing of the scheme. What is clear from the findings of this study is that the ECCE Scheme (2010) is not actually free but heavily subsidised by an ECEC sector that is over-worked and whose unpaid labour of love remain un-recognised with few financial benefits or career progression.

Limitations

Regarding the limitations of this study, the ECCE sector is dominated by women, indeed, 98% of the workforce are female (Pobal, 2018). One male practitioner took part in the interviews, but the rest of the practitioners were female. By having an over-representation of female perspectives, it should be acknowledged that there is a gap in knowledge. Qualitative research can also be difficult to reproduce because of its emphasis on naturalistic observation (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). However, the main aim of this study was to explore parents and practitioners' beliefs on quality ECCE, rather than to make generalisations or produce statistical evidence. The researcher was unable to facilitate a wider study due to the time constraints and resources attributed to the study. Implications for further research may be to conduct longitudinal research with a sample that is nationally representative. Specifically, the exclusion of the child's voice from the research study was due to the rigorous process required to gain approval from the ethics committee when conducting research with children. Another limitation of this study was the sampling technique used. The snowballing technique was used to gain access to ECCE practitioners and served as a referral mechanism. A weakness of the snowballing technique is the possibility of introducing bias into the data collection procedure as participants may only refer others who are similar to them. This was combated by giving participants clear instructions on who was eligible to take part in the study. A purposive random sample was also used from a list of ECCE settings. This list was accessed from the TUSLA website. Bias may have influenced the cohort chosen. This was reduced by specifying that prospective participants were required to be participating in the ECCE Scheme (2010).

Implications for Future Research

"Over the programme year 2017/18, 118,899 children benefited from ECCE" (Pobal, 2018). Although the demand for ECCE services is high, the current structure and funding of the ECCE Scheme (2010) has caused increased financial burdens and disquiet within the ECCE sector (Oireachtas, 2017b). This study finds that the scheme requires immediate investment, specifically, in areas such as capitation rates, non-contact time, the implementation of the national frameworks and appropriate salaries. Findings also indicate that parents are

dissatisfied with the eligible start dates and describe the scheme as “discriminatory.” It is as a result of these findings that the following recommendations are put forward:

1. It is recommended that an independent nationally representative review is conducted to assess the actual costs of participating in the ECCE scheme for providers and the number of ECCE hours needed to support optimal development for children participating in ECCE.
2. All children regardless of their date of birth are entitled to two full years (38 weeks per year) of the ECCE Scheme (2010).
3. As recommended by Minister Zappone (Oireachtas, 2017a), “If I were a child care worker, I would join a union.” A union with representative number that represents the best interests of practitioners is required, in order to act on behalf of the ECCE sector in matters such as the enactment of occupational profiles and pay scales.
4. As recommended by Minister Zappone, an application on behalf of the ECCE profession can then be made to the Labour Court to obtain a sectoral employment order (SEO) “regarding pay for the whole early years sector” (Oireachtas, 2017a).

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